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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0714
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0509
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000917

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR PM MARK ADAMS AND EUR/ACE FOR GERRY OBENDORFER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/07/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEK DEFENSE MINISTER LEADS TOUR OF KAGAN
DISASTER ZONE

REF: A. TASHKENT 901
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 891

Classified By: Political Officer Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On August 5 embaffs, visiting U.S. Army experts, and representatives of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs met with Uzbek Minister of Defense Ruslan Mirzayev in Bukhara Province to tour the disaster site and discuss details of a U.S. military assistance package. Mirzayev expressed appreciation for the assistance and personally led a limited tour to the site of the munitions explosions; access was not granted inside the depot perimeter, but the group was allowed to inspect and photograph loose ordnance strewn nearby. Signs of structural damage in a nearby residential area were clearly visible, suggesting that some Kagan residents have suffered more than the Government of Uzbekistan cares to admit. Mirzayev downplayed the scale of the disaster and probably overstated the progress Uzbek sappers have already made in clearing portions of the disaster zone. Pol-Mil staff presented possible long-term assistance programs to Mirzayev; however, he did not provide any immediate feedback or authorize sufficient access to the site for a thorough assessment. There is a green light for five U.S. military personnel to immediately deliver equipment and provide training assistance to Uzbek counterparts. While the assistance is more limited than we initially planned, it is a valuable opportunity to enhance mil-to-mil cooperation and build up the bilateral relationship. We will also follow up about possible long-term assistance, as the Government of Uzbekistan is notoriously slow in deciding what is in its best interest. End summary.

Briefing from Defense Minister

[1](#)2. (C) Following an August 4 briefing with Deputy Minister of Defense Rustam Niyazov in Tashkent (ref A), U.S. Army

experts, officials from the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Acting Defense Attache, and poloff traveled to Bukhara to meet with Uzbek Minister of Defense Mirzayev to discuss the Kagan disaster and forthcoming U.S. military assistance. Mirzayev was gracious but hurried, and he seemed worn down by what must undoubtedly have been a stressful and exhausting four weeks in the aftermath of the July 10 explosions. Mirzayev has personally been on the scene in Kagan since the disaster, and we dropped him off at his command tent - complete with a flag pole - in the hastily-erected but seemingly permanent military camp for the sapper units.

¶3. (C) Mirzayev wanted to clarify that, contrary to some reports in the press, no air force ordnance was stored at the depot. The vast quantity of Red Army munitions dated from the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan when, according to Mirzayev, "rules of maintaining ammunition were broken," and fully assembled, fused rounds were placed into storage. He reiterated what National Security Council Chairman Ataev told DAS Krol during his visit (ref B) that the Government of Uzbekistan managed to eliminate nearly 200 tons of the stockpile over the past three years with limited resources. He said the higher priority was another depot 18 kilometers from Termez at Uch Kizil, just three kilometers from the Afghanistan border; he claimed 5,000 tons of munitions were eliminated in two years and as of March 2008 that depot was completely decommissioned. (Comment: It is significant that the Government of Uzbekistan recognized the risk and took some steps to reduce these stockpiles well before the Kagan explosions, which may make long-term assistance projects an easier sell. End comment.)

¶4. (C) Mirzayev noted the soil is particularly salty in Bukhara Province, which accelerates the oxidization process and further destabilizes the stored ammunition. Therefore, the Uzbeks had constructed protective platforms to reduce risk at the depot. He also described measures to improve security at the depot over the past decade, including increasing the height of protective berms from two to six meters, installing several concentric rings of fences, providing night vision goggles at security checkpoints, and deploying video surveillance, radio networks, and canines.

¶5. (C) Mirzayev said the investigation is still ongoing, but for the first time he said there are two divergent theories and "the human factor" was raised as a possible cause; however, he quickly added that most specialists believe "it was a technical cause." He confirmed that the first fire was in Warehouse #10, which contained 150 millimeter rounds of tank ammunition; subsequently, the fire apparently spread to other nearby structures. He said there were three huge initial explosions within a few minutes of each other, with smaller explosions lasting for twodays. The fires burned for ten days, he said, monitored with special helicopter-mounted infrared devices.

¶6. (C) Mirzayev initially said 90 percent (he initially said 70 percent but then adjusted his estimate to 80 percent and finally 90 percent) of the ammunition rounds of various sizes landed on the territory of the depot. The bulk of the remainder, he added, landed within a one kilometer radius. He conceded that there were 10 instances in which "interactive rounds" (rocket-assisted projectiles (RAPs) with enhanced range) were propelled up to 15 kilometers from the depot. However, he reported that "as of now, the territory within the 15 kilometer range has been completely cleaned up," as had "everything beyond a radius of one kilometer." The real work, he indicated, is inside the territory of the depot itself. Mirzayev mentioned that 60,000 ammunition rounds have also been transferred to a remote site and destroyed. He reiterated his deputy Niyazov's points that they have plenty of good, experienced people to do the work.

¶7. (C) Contrary to the official figures released by the Government of Uzbekistan, Mirzayev said the death toll was seven -- including three military personnel and four

civilians -- but said the figure of 21 wounded is accurate. He said 60,000 people were evacuated from Kagan but that nearly all had returned to their homes.

Site Visit to Disaster Zone

¶18. (C) Mirzayev personally led a tour to the disaster zone in Kagan following the meeting; however, citing safety concerns, the Uzbeks did not permit access inside the main depot perimeter to see the source point of the blast. We were driven on an off-road track around the perimeter of the main fence, where we observed several spent and unexploded live rounds of ordnance. The experts on our team observed that there were not as many rounds visible as expected given the large quantity of ammunition (150,000,000 rounds) which were stored at the depot. It was not evident that there are a substantial number of canals in the affected zone, which suggests that 50 underwater detectors might be excessive for the job at hand. (Comment: While the Uzbeks likely believe they were very accommodating by their standards, our safety was probably not the main reason for denying access into the depot itself, as the off-road track seemed far more risky than the paved access road into the heart of the depot that

we would have preferred to take. Rather, the Uzbeks probably want to keep some distance between us and what they see as sensitive facilities. Unfortunately, this restriction made it impossible to do a thorough assessment of long-term stockpile reduction needs. End comment.)

¶19. (C) On the site visit poloff observed serious structural damage to several residential structures and witnessed several women salvaging household goods from a large demolished concrete structure. Some mud and brick walls appeared to have collapsed in the residential districts as well and, as expected, many windows had been blown out. Damage to the residential area (which is not affluent in the best of times) was not cataclysmic but seemed to be more extensive than the Government of Uzbekistan indicated. There is likely a need for humanitarian assistance despite the Government of Uzbekistan's refusal to accept aid and its assurances that everything is under control.

Limited Short-Term Help Moving Ahead

¶10. (C) The U.S. Army personnel were satisfied by the logistical arrangements discussed with Minister Mirzayev and his deputies and are proceeding to facilitate the delivery of at least half of the requested quantity of detection equipment on a military flight directly to Bukhara along with five additional U.S. military personnel. Post is assisting with logistical support such as visas and diplomatic notes, and it appears that training assistance can get underway as early as August 14. Mirzayev did not immediately comment on the possibility of long-term assistance from the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs to reduce other potentially unstable, obsolete stockpiles of ammunition or do additional project work in Kagan but indicated that he would discuss the matter with his deputies (per ref A Deputy Minister Niyazov was enthusiastic about the idea).

Comment:

¶11. (C) All the details of the limited assistance package are falling into place, and the Ministry of Defense seems to genuinely appreciate the helping hand. Yet it appears that Mirzayev overstated the progress his sapper battalion has already made in clearing the disaster zone, and it appears implausible that they could have possibly "completely cleared" all but the inner kilometer surrounding the depot given the resource constraints and the sheer quantity of munitions. Nonetheless, a limited assistance package of equipment and off-site training from the U.S. has been settled on and the proud Uzbeks likely perceive a lesser need to divulge all the details to us. Mirzayev may also have

been unnerved by rumors that swirled on the internet even before the dust settled that he might get sacked, which could have prompted him to downplay the scope of the problem to protect himself from possible blame.

¶12. (C) It is entirely characteristic for the Uzbeks to deliberate and move slowly before grasping an offer for long-term stockpile reduction assistance, and we will follow up the presentations by the pol-mil representatives to make sure the proper bureaucratic wheels are turning. Meanwhile, the short-term assistance package is more limited than we initially expected but a valuable opportunity to enhance mil-to-mil cooperation and build up the bilateral relationship.

BUTCHER